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Majid Aleissa[1], Hala Sakr[2], Rania Abdelhamid[2], Hassan Salheen[1], Ahmed Hafez[1], Sameera Alkhateeb [1], Sara Alrashed [1] and Mohammed Alomeir [1]

[1]National Family Safety Program, King Abdullah International Medical Research Center, King Abdulaziz Medical City, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (Correspondence to Majid Aleissa: maleissanfsp@gmail.com). [2]Violence and Injury Prevention, Department of Healthier Populations, World Health Organization Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, Cairo, Egypt.

## Abstract

**Background**: Violence against children constitutes a significant public health problem globally.

**Aim**: To document and compare media reports of violence against children before and during COVID-19, and measures taken by countries to address such violence.

**Methods**: This comparative review covered news reports of violence against children from 1 January to 30 June of 2019 and 2020 in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region countries. A total of 823 articles published in Arabic and English, covering incidents, initiatives, opinions and views on all types of violence among children under 18 years of age were sourced using search engines and platforms and reviewed. News on incidents was analysed quantitatively while news on initiatives and opinions was analysed qualitatively.

**Results**: Some 40.3% of the news reports was on incidents, followed by interviews or opinions (31.5%) and initiatives (28.2%). There were 1129 reports of violence against children from 1 January to 30 June of 2019 and 1880 for the same period in 2020. Reports of physical violence increased from 34% in 2019 to 40% in 2020, while reports of sexual violence decreased from

45% in 2019 to 37% in 2020. Views and opinion reports showed 0.4–1.1% alignment with the 7 INSPIRE strategies.

**Conclusion**: The COVID-19 pandemic affected the incidence and reporting of violence against children across the region. It is essential to provide accurate and sensitive media coverage for incidences of violence against children so that survivors and at-risk children can receive adequate support and ensure that communities can tackle it appropriately.

Keywords: violence against children, sexual violence, physical violence, COVID-19, media report, social media, Eastern Mediterranean

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## Introduction

Violence against children (VAC) constitutes a significant global public health problem that affects not only victims but also the community and society at large (1). It is estimated that worldwide one in every 2 children aged 2–17 years experiences some form of violence each year (2). In 2017, the global child (0–17 years) homicide rate was 1.7 per 100 000 children, and was more than twice as high among boys (2.4 per 100 000) as among girls (1.1 per 100 000). An estimated 10% of global child homicides occur in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which has the third-highest estimated child homicide rate in the world (1.52.4 per 100 000) (2). Children exposed to violence are at an increased risk of mental health disorders such as anxiety

and depression; high health-risk behaviours such as smoking, drug abuse and unprotected sex; chronic diseases, including diabetes, cancer and heart disease; and infections such as HIV (2). The economic impact of VAC is also significant. For instance, in the United States of America (USA), the aggregate lifetime cost of VAC alone is estimated at US$ 121.6 billion (3).

Evidence-based guidance to prevent and respond to VAC is presented in the INSPIRE initiative of the World Health Organization (WHO) (4), which includes the following strategies: implementation and enforcement of laws; norms and values; safe environments; parent and caregiver support; income and economic strengthening; response and support services; and education and life skills. These strategies have been proven to effect a 20–50% decrease in prevalence through well-designed programmes (5) together with 2 cross-sectional activities: multisectoral action and coordination, monitoring and evaluation. A rapid reduction in violence is possible with strong political leadership, evidence-based policies, interventions and adequate financing. Governments have committed to ending VAC through their adoption of target 16.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals: “end abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against and torture of children”. Governments are also committed to achieving the related target of reducing the number of children subjected to violence according to the WHO’s Thirteenth General Programme of Work (6) and the WHO’s Strategy for the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 2020–2023: turning vision 2023 into action (7).

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the daily lives of children and families worldwide. Responses to the disease have led to economic crises; school closures; and reduced access to health, social and legal services, all of which may affect the risk of VAC (8). More than 1.5 billion children worldwide live with the increasing risk of violence at home. Loss of income can increase caregivers’ stress levels and thus the likelihood of VAC (9). This is further complicated by the disruption to child healthcare and anti-violence services resulting from the diversion of the healthcare system towards addressing COVID-19 (2).

The 2020 global status report on preventing violence against children noted the increased likelihood of VAC during the pandemic as family members spent more time in close contact and household stress intensified, with potential economic or livelihood losses (2). The lockdown prevented frontline providers in the community (including teachers, social workers, nurses, and physicians, who would be able to detect abuse in normal circumstances) from reporting suspected abuse.

Violence against children has not received sufficient attention amid the COVID-19 crisis, it is under-reported and there is no relevant data, and the media, including electronic media, play a significant role in increasing public awareness of VAC. Unrestricted availability of information on

the types of violence and their prevention can help lower the risk of abuse among potential victims (10). Many researchers have focused on the role of the media as a tool for both surveillance and dissemination of prevention messages (11). Researchers have applied tools to automatically detect reports of violence on social media (12).

This study aimed to develop baseline information on regional media reporting of incidents of VAC during the COVID-19 pandemic and of national and sectorial initiatives to address the phenomenon. It was also to assess the time trends for VAC before and after the pandemic based on media reports and recommend measures to protect children during a crisis.

## Methods

News reports on VAC in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) countries were collected and reviewed for the period 1 January to 30 June in both 2019 and 2020. These included items published on webpages of print media and social media platforms. EMR comprises 22 countries and territories: 5 low-income countries (Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen), 7 lower-middle-income countries (Djibouti, Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Tunisia), 4 upper-middle-income countries (Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya), and 6 high-income countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates).

An internet search was conducted using available search engines and platforms such as Google News, Yahoo News, BBC News, Bizjournals, Bloomberg, DailyMotion, HeadlineSpot, InternetNews.com, NewsLibrary, SkyNews, Today’s Front Pages, and WorldNetDaily News as well as individual local newspaper webpages (see: https://www.newspaperindex.com/). The following keywords were used: child abuse and neglect, child maltreatment, child protection, childhood trauma, physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, neglect, rape, corporal punishment, firearm, gun, victimization, violence, domestic violence, child, children, youth, and age